It’s 4:00 Somewhere

A Meditation on John 1: 29 – 35

Rev. Cathy C. Hoop Grace Presbyterian Church January 19, 2020

There is a little throw away line in the passage we read today. Having been encouraged by John the baptizer to learn about Jesus, two of his disciples chased after Jesus and said, “Rabbi, where are you staying?” Jesus responded, “Come and see!” They did exactly that, they went and saw where Jesus was staying. I imagine word got around pretty quickly that if you invite Jesus into your home you should be prepared for a houseful. Because the new friends hung around. They stayed. They abided with him. There is so much to unpack in this brief story that I’ve never given much thought to the next line: “It was about four o’clock in the afternoon.”

“It was about four o’clock in the afternoon.” Why even think about this line when there are so many possible threads to follows:

* John, letting go of his disciples and encouraging them to walk with Jesus instead
* The many names of Jesus in this brief passage: Lamb of God, Rabbi, Messiah, Anointed One
* The immediate sense of trust which emanated from Jesus, empowering them to follow
* Jesus, renaming Simon, Peter, the rock!

And those are just a few paths through this story. So why should we spend our time on this one odd little comment about the time of day? Four o’clock doesn’t hold particular significance. It isn’t more sacred than any other time of day. There isn’t any symbolism behind it. Yet it is a surprisingly detailed aspect of the story to have been remembered. Forty years after Jesus’ life on earth was over, this gospel message is written down, and somehow, through all the tellings and re-tellings of Jesus meeting Andrew & Simon, this little fact survives: it was four o’clock in the afternoon.

Karoline Lewis, professor of preaching at Luther Seminary, admits that when students would ask her about this detail, she would shrug and say, “I think it simply refers to the time of day.” But the question would linger with her and rise up in her soul, until she had to listen. She offers this perspective:

*Here is where we have to think incarnationally. Since the incarnation is at the heart of John’s Gospel, that the Word became flesh, time matters and marking time matters. Life happens in time and we remember life with time. Important events are not general references -- we don’t say, “our wedding was in the evening* sometime*” or “our baby was born* sometime *in the morning” or “grandpa died* sometime *in the afternoon.” No, we remember these moments with particularity. It was a Tuesday. It was 5:01. The event started at 4:00.[[1]](#endnote-1)*

I’m sure you have those moments. Some of them are deeply personal (a graduation, a wedding, the birth of a child, the completion of a race, the news of a diagnosis, the death of a loved one), but others are corporate: JFK was assassinated at 12:30 pm, MLK at 6:01 pm. Neil Armstrong stepped on the moon at 9:56 pm. Our first black president, Barak Obama, was sworn in at noon on January 20, 2009.

Four o’clock in the afternoon was when the world changed for Andrew, Simon, and a third unnamed and yet to be disciple. As they retold the story, they would come to realize that four o’clock was the time when they accepted Jesus’ invitation to abide with him. From that moment forward, their lives would be re-oriented. Though it is a little murky how the events unfolded, it may be that four o’clock is when Jesus looked at Simon and said, “You will be called Peter.”

Jesus entered into their world and his presence was invitation to a new way of life, a new way of understanding themselves. *“Time matters in this story,” Lewis writes, “not just to mark time, but to remind us of God’s time. That God entered into time when God didn’t have to. That God chose to be limited by time when God didn’t need to. That God decided time matters when omnipresence could give God a very easy out.[[2]](#endnote-2)*

Which makes me wonder, what is your “four o’clock” moment? Or moments? Because, like these soon to be disciples, we, too, are invited to abide with Jesus. It could be a dramatic encounter with the divine, a moment when you experienced God’s presence in mystery and holiness. But it doesn’t have to be. It could be a very ordinary moment on an ordinary day. That’s all it was for these disciples…just an invitation to conversation with someone they had never met. The earth didn’t shake. There were no angel voices. Just Jesus and an invitation to “come and see.” One four o’clock moment led to a lifetime of moments for them.

When I was in high school and college the conversations at Bible study often came around to the question of “when were you saved?” You had to be able to tell a story of a precise moment when you asked Jesus into your life. I was relieved that I could point to a day at Vacation Bible School when we were seated in a circle on the floor to pray. Our teacher asked us to close our eyes and raise our hands if we wanted to ask Jesus into our hearts. I was in third grade. My mother thought it was a bit manipulative…besides, she was pretty sure that Jesus had already taken up residence there.

But the better question is this: when do you remember Jesus asking *you* into *his* life? Jesus came into the world to redeem the entire cosmos, and he invites us all to come and see what this life of abiding is all about. It’s not just one four o’clock moment, but one after another after another. Mine range from birthing my sons to walking into a little church on an ordinary Sunday morning and encountering a female pastor for the first time to the extraordinary experience of being surrounded by compassion and prayer while going through a cancer scare. And so many moments in between in which to abide.

This word, “abide,” is one of John’s favorites. He uses it 34 times in his Gospel. It’s one of those words we don’t use much anymore, and I wonder if we have allowed it to lose some of its power. It feels passive, possibly restful. Abiding, staying where you are, remaining as you are is often the easiest course.

When I hear the word “abide,” my mind goes to this: “and there were in the same region, shepherds, abiding in their fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night.” The nativity story from Luke. I see shepherds around a campfire. They are singing, passing musical instruments around, laughing at one another’s stories, sharing a jug of wine. They are content after the day’s work. They rest. They rest AND they also watch. They watch their flocks to protect them. They watch the skies for storms. Into this faithful scene, an angel chorus breaks in to announce yet another way of abiding. They have to get up and go and see for themselves. They will need to follow to their own 4:00 (a.m.?) moment. It is a moment that will be with them forever, and we have no idea how or if that moment changed them. But we know this: that moment changed us. Which makes me wonder how our holy moments are intertwined.

Abiding with Christ is anything but easy because it’s about staying the course, through the darkness and the light. We see it in the disciples then, and we see it in disciples now. We are given a hint of the challenge when we hear the different names given for Jesus in this passage. John says, “look, here comes the lamb of God, who takes away the world’s sin.” As the lamb of God, Jesus lived a sacrificial life, serving, forgiving and seeking out all who understood themselves to be lost. To abide with the lamb of God is to partner with God in this redemptive work.

We do that whenever we name the injustices around us – especially the ones in which we participate – and then choose to live sacrificially instead. When we speak out, speak up, take a stand for the human dignity of all people and the sanctity of our earth, we are abiding with the lamb. It isn’t rest; it is labor.

King knew this truth. Tomorrow we will remember King’s legacy, and his dream for a world in which the diversity of skin colors is seen as the gift which God imagines. We will remember his desire that all humans be treated with the dignity which God desires. And it will be impossible to get through the day without remembering his sacrifice. King wrote, “[*It is a strangely irrational notion that there is something in the very flow of time that will inevitably cure all ills. Actually time is neutral. It can be used either destructively or constructively. I am coming to feel that the people of ill will have used time much more effectively than the people of good will. We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words and actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence of the good people.*](https://www.azquotes.com/quote/787503)*[[3]](#endnote-3)* Which makes us wonder how many times we have allowed a four o’clock moment to slip right through our fingers. King, like prophets before him, knew that to abide is to remain steadfast on behalf of the oppressed. If we abide with God, we cannot remain silent when others suffer.

Another voice that has refused to remain silent is Bryan Stevenson’s. If you haven’t seen the film, *Just Mercy*, based on Stevenson’s book of the same name, I hope you will make the effort to go. It is the story of how the Equal Justice Initiative was born, and it is a story of vulnerability and sacrifice. As Stevenson begins the work of seeking justice for those wrongly incarcerated on death row here in Alabama, he is met with hatred, but he abides. He is met with intimidation, but he abides, he is met with horrific prejudice, but he abides. He is met with violence, and he abides. God is present through the trauma and the danger, and Stevenson finds “four o’clock” encounters with the holy in many ordinary ways. His abiding is the face of God for those without hope.

What is your four o’clock moment? With whom can you share it as word of encouragement and life? Don’t keep it to yourself. Others need to hear it. If you haven’t had a 4:00 in far too long, could you open yourself to the idea that 4:00 will come around *at least* twice a day? When it does, trust that God invites you home to abide. Just remember: don’t get too comfortable on the sofa, with God, abiding is always a holy adventure.

Thanks be to God who dreams of a world made new! Amen.

1. Lewis, Karoline. <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4793>, *Timely Matters*, January 8, 2017. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. King, Jr., Rev. Martin Luther. *"The Essential Martin Luther King, Jr.: "I Have a Dream" and Other Great Writings".* [↑](#endnote-ref-3)